



Plant Gene Research
Basic Knowledge and Application

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*A Genetic Approach
to Plant Biochemistry*

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With 30 Figures

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Preface

Biologists ask how the growth, development and behaviour of organisms happen, how these processes are co-ordinated and how they are regulated by the environment. Today the questions are phrased in terms of the genes involved, their structure and the control of their expression. Mutations (recognised by a change in phenotype) label genes and can be used to study gene structure, gene function and the organisation of the genome. This is "Genetics". Study of phenotypes down to the level of the enzymes and structural proteins coded for by genes is "Biochemistry". It is self evident that only by studying phenotype ("Biochemistry") can we do "Genetics" and that "Genetics" (perturbation of the phenotype) is the key to understanding the "Biochemistry". There can surely be no better arguments for a more holistic approach to biology than the massive output of knowledge from microbial "Biochemical Genetics" and the more recent revelations from "Molecular Genetic" studies of development in *Drosophila*.

When one remembers that most of the important conceptual developments in genetics (the discovery of the nucleus, the hereditary mechanism, cytoplasmic inheritance, mutation, the one gene-one enzyme hypothesis, semi-conservative replication of DNA, heterochromatin, transposable elements) were discovered by biologists working with plants, it is surprising that the genetic approach to the study of basic plant properties is so underdeveloped when compared to all other biological systems. Because the advantages, the directness and reduced ambiguity, of studying normal functions by perturbing or eliminating single genes are so obvious when compared to the circumstantial approach of pure physiology and biochemistry, there must exist strong reasons why the biochemical genetics of plants is still an emerging field. Undoubtedly there are aspects of biochemistry or molecular biology common to several organisms that one would not choose to study with a complex higher plant. There are not that many efficient cytogenetic systems in plants, like those of maize, *Arabidopsis* or tomato, which are at the same time suited for particular biochemistry. There are also various physical criteria for the isolation of mutants that must be met: Where traits must be screened for by examination of individual plants, the investment of the necessary time and space may be inhibiting. The selection techniques applicable to whole plants required for the rescue of specific mutants may not be available. Lethal nutritional mutants isolated with ease from *Neurospora* may be impossible to find given the complex life cycle of the higher plant.

The "Princes of Serendip" were probably not very far away when studies of

genetic aspects of gibberellins (Chapter 1), abscisic acid (Chapter 2), photosynthesis (Chapter 3) and endosperm proteins (Chapter 7) got under way. Some areas of investigation were set off initially by spontaneous variation in a field and a passing, curious biologist. Others started with the analysis of randomly generated variation following mutagenesis or a dip into a local seed collection to look for a useful variant. The rapid success of the alcohol dehydrogenase systems (Chapter 4) and the growth of nitrate reductase studies (Chapter 5) are clearly due to powerful and simple chemical selection systems being available for mutants deficient in the enzymes, and to the conditional lethality of the traits. There are, unfortunately, very few positive selection systems for deficient mutants. Cell and protoplast culture offer both a method for conveniently selecting or screening for mutants amongst very large cell populations and a way of rescuing lethal nutritional mutants. Isolation of variation is carried out at the cell level and thus many mutants may be found that would not otherwise be recognised by plant selection. After selection, plants may be regenerated and normal genetics and biochemistry undertaken. Cell culture was central to the isolation of the majority of nitrate reductase deficient mutants (Chapter 5). An account of the recent successes in the isolation of plant auxotrophs via cell and protoplast culture is given in Chapter 10.

The life cycle of the majority of higher plants includes the liberation of enormous numbers of semi-autonomous haploid gametophytes (pollen grains). The realisation that many important sporophytic genes are expressed in pollen grains and that the selection for new alleles may occur in natural populations at this level has stimulated interest in gametophytic gene expression (Chapter 9) and the possibility that mutant selection using pollen could increase the variation available to the breeder and the biochemist. Plant breeding rather than biochemistry is probably the greater stimulus to research in nodulation and nitrogen fixation in legumes (Chapter 6) and in plant/pathogen genes (Chapter 8) but, as the authors point out, in these and so many other areas of plant breeding there is an increasing need to understand the mechanisms and the molecular events involved. The protection and stabilisation of our plant resources is a worthy target for plant biochemical genetics.

Basel, August 1986

A. D. Blonstein and P. J. King

Contents

Chapter 1 **Gibberellin Mutants** J. B. Reid, Hobart, Australia

- I. Introduction 1
- II. Selection and Identification of Mutants 2
- III. GA Synthesis 8
- IV. Internode Length 8
 - A. Synthesis Mutants 8
 - B. Insensitive Mutants 14
- V. Seed Dormancy 17
- VI. Flowering and Senescence 18
- VII. Site of Action of GA Mutants 22
- VIII. Conclusions 25
- IX. References 26

Chapter 2 **Genetic Aspects of Abscisic Acid** M. Koornneef, Wageningen, The Netherlands

- I. Introduction 35
 - A. Abscisic Acid as a Plant Hormone 35
 - B. Biosynthesis and Metabolism of ABA 36
 - C. Genetic Aspects of ABA 36
- II. ABA-Deficient Mutants 38
 - A. Isolation, Genetic and General Phenotypic Characteristics 38
 - B. Pleiotropic Effects of ABA-Deficient Mutants 41
 - C. Biochemistry of ABA-Deficient Mutants 41
 - D. The Use of ABA Mutants in Water Relations Research 44
 - E. The Use of ABA Mutants in Seed Physiology 44
 - F. ABA Deficiency in Relation to Other Physiological Effects 46
- III. Mutants Affecting ABA Sensitivity 46
- IV. Genetic Differences in ABA Accumulation 48
- V. Conclusions 50
- VI. References 50

Chapter 3 Mutants as Tools for the Elucidation of Photosynthetic Processes

C. Critchley and W. Bottomley, Canberra, Australia

- I. Introduction 55
- II. Two Genomes Code for the Structural and Regulatory Elements of the Photosynthetic Apparatus 59
- III. Identification of Thylakoid Membrane Proteins and Their Functions 61
- IV. From Phenotype to Gene Structure 62
 - A. Herbicide Resistance 62
 - B. Barley 63
 - C. *Chlamydomonas* 64
 - D. *Arabidopsis* 65
 - E. *Oenothera* 65
 - F. Summary 66
- V. Conclusions 68
- VI. References 69

Chapter 4 Maize Alcohol Dehydrogenase: A Molecular Perspective

W. L. Gerlach, M. M. Sachs, D. Llewellyn, E. J. Finnegan and E. S. Dennis, Canberra, Australia and St. Louis, Mo., U. S. A.

- I. Introduction 74
- II. Genetics and Expression of ADH Enzymes in Maize 74
 - A. Two Genes Encode ADH in Maize 74
 - B. Organ Specificities of ADH1 and ADH2 Activities 75
 - C. Mutations of *Adh* Genes of Maize 75
 - D. The Maize Anaerobic Response 76
- III. Isolation of *Adh* Genes 78
 - A. cDNAs from Anaerobically Induced Maize Genes 78
 - B. Isolation and Identification of *Adh1* cDNA Clones 79
 - C. Isolation and Identification of *Adh2* cDNA Clones 81
 - D. Isolation of *Adh* Genes from Other Plant Species 81
- IV. Structure of Plant *Adh* Genes 82
- V. Three-Dimensional Structure of ADH Enzymes 84
- VI. Genetic Change Around and Within *Adh* Genes of Maize 86
 - A. Allelic Variation 86
 - B. Somaclonal Variation 87
 - C. Gene Duplication 87
 - D. Ds Element Mutations in *Adh1* 88
 - E. Robertson's Mutator 88
- VII. Approaches to the Mechanism of *Adh* Gene Regulation 89
 - A. DNA Sequence Comparisons 89
 - B. Mutations in *Adh* Which Affect Expression 92
- VIII. *In Vivo* Expression of *Adh* 93

- A. Attempts at Expression in Cereal Tissue Culture Cells 94
- B. Testing Maize *Adh* Gene Activity in Dicotyledonous Plant Cells 95
- C. Expression of Maize *Adh* in Animal Cells 95
- IX. Conclusions 96
- X. References 96

Chapter 5 The Molecular Genetics of Higher Plant Nitrate Assimilation
J. L. Wray, St. Andrews, Scotland

- I. Introduction 101
- II. The Nitrate Assimilation Pathway 102
 - A. Nitrate Uptake 102
 - B. Nitrate Reductase 103
 - C. Nitrite Reductase 108
- III. Genetics of Nitrate Assimilation 108
 - A. Introduction 108
 - B. Nitrate Uptake Mutations 110
 - C. Nitrate Reductase Mutations 111
 - D. Nitrite Reductase Mutations 130
 - E. Regulatory Alterations in Nitrate Assimilation 131
 - F. Conclusions 133
- IV. Applied Aspects 134
 - A. Somatic Hybridisation 134
 - B. Cloning Nitrate Assimilation Genes 135
 - C. Plant Gene Transfer Systems 140
 - D. Whole Plant Studies 141
- V. References 143

Chapter 6 Plant Genetic Approaches to Symbiotic Nodulation and Nitrogen Fixation in Legumes

P. M. Gresshoff and A. C. Delves, Canberra, Australia

- I. Introduction 158
- II. A General Description of Legume Nodule Ontogeny 161
- III. The *Parasponia-Bradyrhizobium* Symbiosis 168
- IV. Biochemical and Molecular Analysis of Plant Functions 170
- V. Gene-for-Gene Aspects of Nodulation 171
- VI. Existing Plant Variation in Symbiotic Nitrogen Fixation 174
- VII. Existing Single Locus Variation for Nodulation-Nitrogen Fixation 177
- VIII. Induced Mutation in Symbiotic Characters 178
 - A. Pea and Chickpea Mutants 179
 - B. Soybean Nodulation Mutants 181

IX. Conclusions 194

X. References 195

Chapter 7 Endosperm Proteins

P. I. Payne, Cambridge, U. K.

- I. Introduction 207
- II. Origin and Development of the Endosperm 208
- III. Classification of the Major Endosperm Proteins 209
- IV. Biochemical Complexity and Genetic Variation of Endosperm Proteins 211
- V. Gene Mutations 214
 - A. Role in Plant Breeding 215
 - B. Role in Genetics 217
 - C. Role in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology 218
 - D. Role in the Food Industry 222
- VI. Chromosome Mutations 223
- VII. Conclusions 226
- VIII. References 227

Chapter 8 Molecular Approaches to Plant and Pathogen Genes

R. I. S. Brettell and A. J. Pryor, Canberra, Australia

- I. Introduction 233
- II. A Molecular Approach to Gene-for-Gene Resistance 235
 - A. The Shotgun Method 236
 - B. Transposon Mutagenesis or Gene Tagging 238
- III. The Role of Toxins in Plant Disease 239
- IV. Conclusions 242
- V. References 243

Chapter 9 Gametophytic Gene Expression

D. L. Mulcahy, Amherst, Mass., U. S. A.

- I. Introduction 247
- II. Overlap Between Sporophytic and Gametophytic Genotypes 249
- III. Gametophytic Gene Expression and the Angiosperms 251
- IV. The Influence of Haploid Genotype on Pollen Size 252
- V. Time of Gene Expression in Pollen 252
- VI. Methods of Haploid Selection 252
- VII. Gametophytic Gene Expression and the Style 254
- VIII. Gene Expression in the Megagametophyte 255

IX. Conclusions	255
X. References	256
Chapter 10	Auxotroph Isolation <i>In Vitro</i>
	A. D. Blonstein, Basel, Switzerland
I. Introduction	259
A. Some Preliminary Comments	259
B. Why Auxotrophs?	260
C. The Characteristics, Advantages and Disadvantages of <i>In vitro</i> Systems for Mutant Isolation	261
D. Species Suitable for Auxotroph Isolation	262
II. Mutagenesis	263
III. Methods of Selection	264
A. Conditions and Media	264
B. Positive Selection	265
C. Negative Selection	266
IV. Phenotypes	270
A. Amino-Acid, Vitamin and Purine Auxotrophs	270
B. Nitrate Reductase Mutants	271
C. Temperature-Sensitive Mutations	271
V. Fusion and Transformation	272
VI. Conclusions and Future Prospects	273
VII. References	274
Subject Index	281